

Using Mazes in a Teacher-Training Course

By Jill Cadorath

This article will describe the design of materials used in an in-service teacher- training course to introduce the idea of reading mazes (Woodward 1991). I shall start by describing what a maze is and the context in which a particular maze was used. I shall go on to look at the design process and finally comment on the results of using the maze and its potential for EFL and teacher-training classes.

What is a reading maze?

A maze is like a labyrinth in that the person entering the maze is faced with a number of possible routes. Each route will lead in a different direction. Some routes are blind alleys and have no exit. Others will lead to further crossroads where yet another pathway has to be chosen. By choosing certain pathways the exit is finally reached.

In a reading maze, the reader in a similar fashion is faced with different options. Decisions must be made, not all of which will have positive results. Some paths may seem productive at the outset but may, in fact, not fulfill their promise. Others will lead eventually to a more satisfactory outcome.

How are They Useful?

Reading mazes may be used in a variety of situations, with participants working in groups. Woodward (1991) writes:

The group must discuss each situation as it unfolds, arrive at a common consensus on which paths to take, and move on. If the texts are well written, the situations interesting, the decisions realistic, and the exit solutions satisfying, then the work will go well. The trick is to find a subject and set of choices that groups can identify with or become interested in.

Why Design a Maze?

The maze I produced for my trainees follows, together with a description of the design process. The aim was twofold. In the first instance I wanted to give the trainees the experience of trying out a maze and looking at the design procedure. (In this way we would be focusing on the

process of the activity.) Secondly, and perhaps of greater importance in the long run, I wanted the trainees to consider carefully the situations they would encounter while doing the maze (which was specifically concerned with the area of teacher development) and select those which would be appropriate for a program of developmental activities within their own university departments. (The focus here would be on the *product* of the activity.)

The Training Context

The trainees were attending a Diploma course in English Language Teaching (ELT), extending over 18 months and partly distance-taught, in the southeast of Mexico. The course is for in-service teachers of English at university language centers, many of whom have had several years experience but no formal training. The aims of the course are to improve the teaching of English at university level and to enhance the training capacity of Mexican teachers. It is therefore hoped that many of the people graduating from these courses will, in turn, become teacher trainers.

In pursuing these aims we encourage participants to find ways to solve problems and to conduct their own classroom research; to consider not only the teacher and the teaching process but also the learner and learning, the classroom setting, the roles and relationships that exist in the classroom, and the evaluation, adaptation, and implementation of materials. In other words we would like to think that we are starting the teacher on the path towards comprehensive development of professional expertise.

Development is an ongoing process which requires further effort from the trainees themselves, as independent learners, in order to remain enthusiastic about their jobs, and to achieve personal growth. The idea behind the use of the maze was, therefore, to introduce some of the possible teacher development activities in an innovative way as well as to focus on the reading strategies and design processes.

The Design Process

Writing a maze is a complicated procedure and involves several stages of design, trial, and adaptation. The different stages are outlined below, with examples from the maze specifically designed for this group of teachers.

Step 1: State the situation which forms the starting point for entry to the maze. (See Figure 1 below)

Step 2: Consider the routes, or options, that you want to be open to your own students and write them, as succinctly as possible, on Card 1. These are the starting points for diverging paths. The four options that I wanted the Diploma participants to consider were:

1. Using their recently acquired knowledge and skills in their language classes; trying things out and reflecting on their success.
2. Passing on their knowledge to their colleagues (the teacher-training option).
3. Continuing to investigate and do classroom research—the aim being that they should continue to analyze the classroom environment, their students, and themselves as teachers.
4. Thinking about more training. (This was an important option for cultural reasons, as several of the graduates were interested in getting involved in planning curriculum design etc. and felt they would need a more academic qualification to have any power within the national university system.)

With these 4 starting points I produced Card 1. (See Figure 2 below)

Step 3: The next stage is to build up for each point a series of related ideas which will eventually form the different cards in the maze. One of the easiest ways to do this is to construct a "mind-map" in which points that are related to a central topic form a web of ideas that can be further developed as new ideas occur.

Step 4: Transfer the points on the mind-map onto cards.

Step 5: After this has been done for each of the original main points, cross-reference and decide which will be EXIT cards, i.e. those cards which will signify an outcome and will lead no further.

Step 6: Try out all the possible routes yourself and correct any errors.

Entry to Maze
<p>You are about to finish the Diploma in ELT and although this is the end of the course, you feel that it also marks the beginning of a further period of professional development. For some of the options open to you, READ CARD 1.</p>

1
<p>a. You want to use your new knowledge in your classes. MOVE TO CARD 2.</p> <p>b. You want to pass on your knowledge to others—your colleagues, for example. MOVE TO CARD 3.</p> <p>c. You still have lots of questions for which you want the answers. MOVE TO CARD 4.</p>

d. You are thinking about further study! A trainer-training course or an MA. MOVE TO CARD 5.

2

You have a choice:

a. You liked some of the activities you did on the Diploma course so you try them out exactly the same way with your own students. MOVE TO CARD 6.

b. You take certain ideas, adapt them to fit your situation, try them out and adapt them again if necessary. MOVE TO CARD 7.

3

You want to share your new knowledge with colleagues. How?

a. You devise a series of seminars/workshops for your colleagues. MOVE TO CARD 11. **b.** You decide to do a Needs Analysis to find out what they need and want. MOVE TO CARD 12.

4

There are still lots of questions to which you want to find the answers.

You can read about them in books. MOVE TO CARD 16.

You can do some classroom research. MOVE TO CARD 17.

5

You want to continue your studies or training. You have a choice:

a. to do some teacher-training outside the university. MOVE TO CARD 24.

b. to take a trainer-training course. MOVE TO CARD 25.

c. to follow a more academic path. MOVE TO CARD 26.

6

A lot of the ideas don't seem to work as well in your classes as they did in the course. You've forgotten why you're doing them and your class is stunned by the sudden bombardment of strange ideas. Confusion. Lack of confidence. RETURN TO CARD 2.

7

a. The activities work well. You gain confidence gradually as you adopt and adapt more ideas. Your classes gain confidence as they find they can communicate more and more successfully in English. Things are looking up. MOVE TO CARD 8.

b. They still aren't as successful as they should be. Is it your fault? Is it the fault of the students? The materials? MOVE TO CARD 9.

8

Your techniques improve, your classes improve. So, what now?
RETURN TO CARD 1 and choose another option.

9

Try getting help from your colleagues by discussing it with them. You can do this . . .

a. informally in the staff room. MOVE TO CARD 10.

b. by bringing it up at a regular monthly teachers' meeting. MOVE TO CARD 13.

c. by reading more about it. MOVE TO CARD 16.

10

You've managed to find five minutes between classes to talk it over with one teacher but it's all rather hurried and besides, you feel other teachers might have something to offer. MOVE TO CARD 13.

11

Your colleagues resent your new knowledge and wonder whether you can really help them. They are suspicious and argumentative. Try a new approach. RETURN TO CARD 3.

12

Your Needs Analysis shows that teachers have problem areas. You have three choices:

a. Run a problem-solving session. MOVE TO CARD 13.

b. Get together two or three people for a team-teaching session. MOVE TO CARD 14.

c. Have an activity-sharing session. MOVE TO CARD 15.

13

You run a problem-solving session.

a. It goes very well. Teachers raised problems and everyone helped to find answers. MOVE TO CARD 19.

b. It goes well but some of the problems still haven't been answered. MOVE TO CARD 16.

14

This is easier than doing it alone and saves time and effort. Maybe your untrained colleagues could also join the team—they will have something to offer from their classroom experience. EXIT.

15

Teachers enjoy these—they're all contributing ideas they know and use or ideas they've found in a book and would like to try. MOVE TO CARD 28.

16

You review some of the literature on the subject. You have a good selection of books now—both theoretical and practical.

a. You read about the subject yourself, and find some interesting answers to your questions. MOVE TO CARD 18.

b. Get individual teachers to survey individual books. MOVE TO CARD 13.

c. You decide to investigate what you have read and extend your enquires to the

classroom itself. MOVE TO CARD 17.

17

***You're embarking on Classroom Research!
You try something out with a particular class.***

Your own? MOVE TO CARD 19.

You need to observe another teacher's class?
MOVE TO CARD 20.

18

Write it up as an article for an ELT magazine. EXIT.

19

The results are interesting!

a. You want your colleagues to know.
MOVE TO CARD 29.

b. You want Mexican EFL teachers to know.
You like writing. MOVE TO CARD 18.
You like speaking. MOVE TO CARD 21.

c. You really like this type of classroom research. MOVE TO CARD 26.

20

You'll have to be tactful if you are observing another teacher's class. You have a choice:

a. Ask a teacher who studied the Diploma with you. MOVE TO CARD 22.

b. Ask another teacher. MOVE TO CARD 23.

21

Present a paper at a conference! EXIT.

22

Fine! I'm sure s/he understands what you're doing and why, but s/he may want to do the same in return! MOVE TO CARD 19.

23

It's probably better to focus on research of student activity rather than teacher activity.
Explain beforehand very carefully what you're doing and why. Offer the teacher the chance to observe you doing the same with your own class. Discuss your findings afterwards. MOVE TO CARD 19.

24

We're pleased that you will be joining the group of teacher-trainers! Come up with a proposal and present it to your university.
a. Maybe they'll accept it and give you the go-ahead. MOVE TO CARD 27.
b. Maybe the university doesn't want to get involved with teacher-training. So why don't you consider getting involved in some way with other teacher-training courses.1 MOVE TO CARD 25.

25

You'll probably need a short specialized trainer-training course, to help prepare you for work on these courses. Put your name down for one of the short courses that your trainers hope to be running later this year. Your professional development is continuing. EXIT.

26

You want to know more. You like research. Maybe you want to specialize in materials production, teacher-training, administration etc. But you'll have to wait! There is unlikely to be an MA program in ELT in Mexico until next year. Until then, RETURN TO CARD 5 and choose another option.

27

Congratulations! Now comes the hard work but there's a lot of demand at secondary and high school level and we know you'll be able to help them. EXIT.

28

Start creating a materials bank for teachers to dip into. Put copies of your ideas/materials up on the wall or notice-board for teachers' to see, and introduce them at the monthly teachers meetings. The sharing of ideas is an important step towards the creation of a team of professionals. EXIT.

Bring up your conclusions at a monthly meeting or problem-solving session. You might be solving someone else's problem as well as your own. EXIT.

Step 7: Pilot the maze, by asking others to try it out, individually and in groups. This will provide further information concerning possible problem areas e.g. timing, ambiguities, false options (where wording is such that it discourages choice of certain options), possible re-routings, and suggestions for other paths.

Step 8: Adapt the maze in response to the feedback and pilot it again.

Step 9: Make any further alterations and transfer the final product onto cards. The cards on the adjoining page form the final version of the maze for the Diploma teachers. (As this maze was written with a specific group of teachers in mind, some of the options are relevant only to the local context.)

Results

On completing the maze, the group of trainees were encouraged to do the following:

1. To plan a year's timetable of teacher development sessions. This they did (all trainees from one university together in one group) in the form of a poster which was then put up on the wall for other groups to see. The trainees were asked to select one activity and commit themselves to carrying out that activity at some time during the year by signing their poster.
2. To investigate the various steps in the design of the maze and discuss the procedure of implementation and feedback in the classroom. This, they felt, would enable them to design mazes for their particular groups of students.

Discussion of the above meant that we covered both the product (teacher development) and the process (the design) of the activity. The teacher development content was seen as particularly relevant as participants were at the end of their course and were keen to continue with professional and personal growth but unsure what was available to them in the way of further activities.

With regard to the process, one of the points that arose in the discussion was that designing a maze could be time-consuming. Nevertheless, the group as a whole agreed that they had been very absorbed in the activity precisely because it had been written for them and that the decisions they faced were relevant and would occur in the near future. By cutting down on the number of cards, the time spent in preparation could be reduced.

Jill Cadorath is an English language teacher adviser for the Overseas Development Administration in southeast Mexico, where she is coordinating the Regional Diploma in English Language Teaching at the University of Yucatan. She has worked in Portugal, Spain, Brazil and Malaysia. Her main interests are in-service teacher training and course design.

References

Woodward, T. 1991. Models and metaphors in language teacher training. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Figure 1

Entry to Maze
You are about to finish the Diploma in ELT and although this is the end of the course, you feel that it also marks the beginning of a further period of professional development. For some of the options open to you, READ CARD 1.

Figure 2

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